

Random acts of grammar

By Carter Hammett

It would have been anyone's guess that the high tech wizardry offered by today's adaptive technology (AT) would have its roots in a little Danish invention called The Malling Hansen Writing Ball. First conceived in 1870, that humble device became better known as the typewriter and was originally conceived as an instrument that enabled blind people to write. Needless to say, things have changed a little since then, and now the array of technological choices available to job seekers with disabilities substantially levels the playing field, enabling them to be more competitive players in a rapidly-changing workforce.

Three years ago, high tech entrepreneur Lisa Allen co-founded Global E-Text, a software distribution company that specializes in customizing assistive technology for persons with disabilities. Allen, who lives with dyslexia and other learning disabilities, got the idea for the company while she and her partner were students at York University.

"We got a disability bursary to pay for accommodations (modified equipment to perform tasks) but what we bought wasn't a good fit at the time," she says. "They didn't know our disabilities, and we didn't know their technology."

That's changed, and now Global E-Text offers a wide variety of products and services to match the challenges created by virtually any disability. The company's flagship product, WYNN, for example, features built in word prediction, which allows users a variety of word choice options. It also features built-in sector-specific glossaries that enable users to write in technical language relevant to their field of work that is grammatically correct. This is heaven for someone with language processing disorders or impaired motor functions.

Another choice available is the IPAQ, a hand-held pocket PC that uses wireless technology to convert word processing, database or Internet text into audio files. Additionally, the IPAQ's versatility gets bolstered with the addition of a thesaurus, calculator, or even a global positioning system (GPS) that provides maps and directions via satellite.

Kevin Mulholland, 38, a consultant and trainer with the Kitchener-based assistive technology provider Humanomics, has trained dozens of individuals on varying technologies for the non-profit and corporate sectors. He notes that AT can be used both proactively and reactively.

“An injury can occur on the job and I’ll go in and maybe sit for a few days with the person and watch every move they make. A task may require 25 movements of your hand; AT can reduce that movement dramatically.”

One of the most popular training products is the text-to-speech software, Kurzweil. “You take a book and scan it so the computer reads it back to you,” he says, noting the software also includes diction and note taking features. Essential, when one considers how much reading is normally required during a single day.

And while AT can be pricey, various government services such as Workplace Safety and Insurance Board and the Ontario Disability Support Program can provide coverage, as can some private insurance companies.

The AT that is used will largely depend on the type and intensity of the disability being served, and all adaptive technology depends on a thorough assessment to match with the user’s needs as closely as possible. Thus, text-to-speech software such as JAWS, while useful for blind and those with low-vision, is virtually useless for someone who is deaf.

Lisa Allen notes the importance of assessments as well. “If the technology is poorly designed, it can be cumbersome and inefficient. The learning curve can also be steep, depending on the type of disability,” she says. “When it’s designed well, everybody wins.”

Adaptive technology can also increase productivity, and foster brand loyalty, says Allen. “Hiring persons with disabilities creates a flexible, more open work force,” noting that most of her own staff have disabilities. “Disabled employees are extremely hard-working and tend to be incredibly loyal. We’re also incredible problem solvers. I spend my entire day problem solving, and I have to find many alternatives, not

one, because you're never sure if only one will work. My disability makes me who I am, but it also makes me the asset that I am."

Check out the following web sites for more information about adaptive technology:

Global E-Text: www.globaletext.com

Humanomics: www.humanomics.ca

**Adult Learning Disability Employment Resources:
www.aldercentre.com**

Abilities Magazine: www.abilities.ca

Link Up Employment Services: www.linkup.ca

Adaptive Technology Resource Centre: www.utoronto.ca/atrc/

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